The Provisional City - Chapter VII, Part I

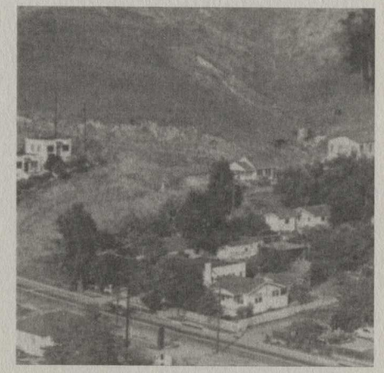
And 10,000 More: Remaking Chávez Ravine

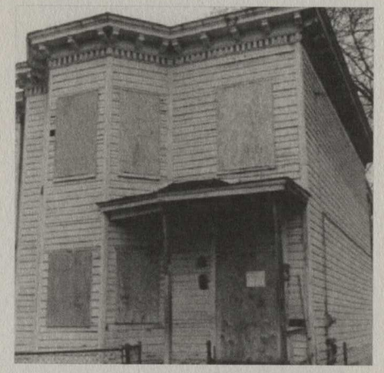
By Dana Cuff

Children playing outside of Palo Verde Elementary School in Chávez Ravine - Potograph by Don Normark

While Fritz Burns was giving lectures about revitalizing dilapidated buildings through private means, Frank Wilkinson was herding politicians and powerful citizens through the most deteriorated neighborhoods of Los Angeles as visceral proof that new housing had to be built. Wilkinson believed that awareness of the deplorable conditions in the slums would ensure support for affordable housing programs. He was following the Rosenman method, named after the head of the National Housing Committee who made slum tours a strategic part of pro-housing lobbying across the nation.

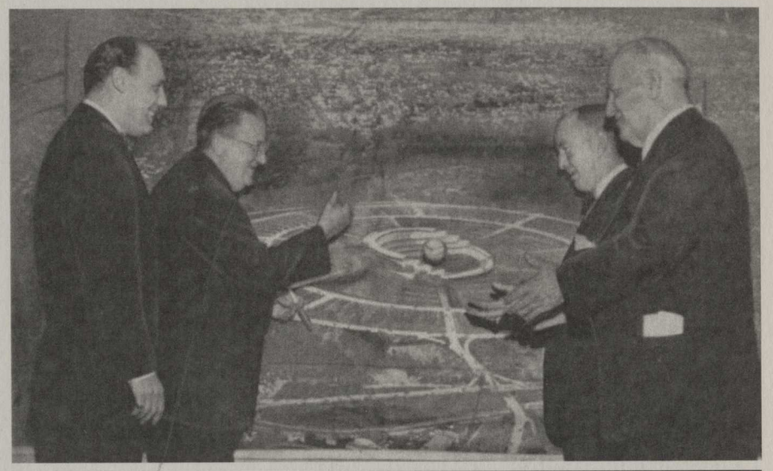
In the late 1940s, housing was still easily defined as a crisis in Los Angeles. Veterans were inadequately housed, and there were desperately poor areas of makeshift housing. Some of this part of LA was documented by capable photographers like Otto Rothschild, Louis Stoumen, and Leonard Nadel. Nadel's slum photographs, commissioned by the Housing Authority, are remarkable works of art, anthropology, and propaganda, portraying the worst of substandard housing inhabited by a submerged (usually white) middle class-the "deserving poor." These were not unlike the Depression-era Farm Security Administration images of Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, and company, which illustrated the need for federal support for the rural poor.





Housing, Chavez Ravine, California - Credits Los Angeles Herald Examiner Photo Collection (Top)

Housing, Church Hill - The Valentine Museum (Bottom)



Stadium to be built in Chávez Ravine - Los Angeles Herald Examiner Photo Collection

By the late forties, housing activists were building creative linkages between slum clearance for downtown redevelopment and public housing. In 1948, Mayor Bowron appointed the city's first five commissioners to the Community Redevelopment Agency, under the authority of the state Community Re-Development Act, passed by the legislature in 1945. The intent was to clear slums in both urban and rural areas, t o create sites to be leased or sold to private interests for commercial or residential construction. It was required that "any and all people displaced in the process be offered safe, sanitary housing at a price within their means." In Los Angeles, the lack of decent, affordable housinging for the displaced slum residents was a "major stumbling block."

It was easy then to make the case that downtown Los Angeles—Bunker Hill, for example- could not be redeveloped unless public housing legislation was passed. "However, with the advent of the new Congress and the expected early passage of a low-rent housing program, it is reasonable to expect that this problem will be eased to some degree. If so, mid-town Los Angeles can look forward to an early, and much-needed face-lifting" (Housing News, 1948a, p. 4).

Downtown Skyline from Church Hill - The Valentine Museum

When the 1949 Federal Housing Act passed, it promoted an early version of redevelopment and provided for new public housing as well. While real estate interests were pursuing the implications o f redevelopment, housing advocates initiated 10,000 more units of low-rent housing across Los Angeles. 'Like nearly all large U.S. cities, Los Angeles had established its public housing program, even if it was not as robust as some others; by 1952, there were 7.5 public housing units in Los Angeles per 1,000 persons, compared to 18.5 per thousand in Boston and 14.2 per thousand in New York.' Southern California housing advocates hoped the 1949 appropriations would make up some of this difference.

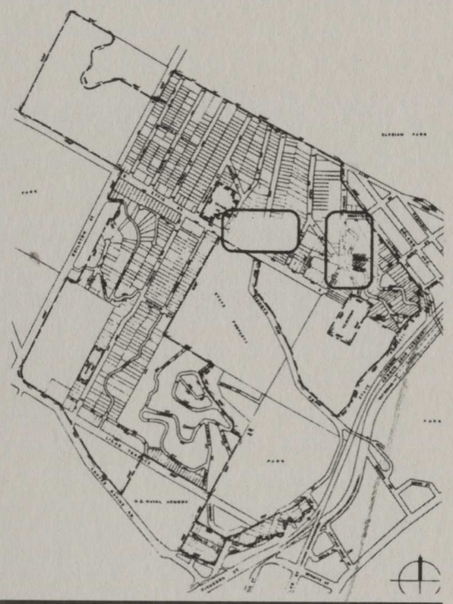
A resident is forcibly evicted from their home in Chávez Ravine - Los Angeles Herald Examiner Photo Collection

Public housing advocates took the opportunity o f the widespread postwar housing crisis to initiate an extensive new series of projects. Wilkinson, accompanied by Simon Eisner and Joe Solons of the Health Department, spent a month in 1945 conducting an “eye survey” of substandard housing in Los Angeles, looking for possible sites to develop. According to Wilkinson, “We were always thinking about sites”* They knew that a large appropriation would be coming when a federal housing act was finally passed. Wilkinson was supposed to have all the sites selected before that time. At least a year before the 1949 Act, he, Eisner, and Solons had settled on eleven different sites, mostly located in the vicinity of downtown, stretching from Chavez Ravine at the north to Jordan Downs in Watts (see fig. 9).

Like The Flats, the Chavez Ravine area had been determined to be a slum by a finding that most of its dwellings were substandard. Descriptions of Chavez Ravine tell another story, such as that by Leo Politi (1966), artist and historian, written after the last homes there were demolished:

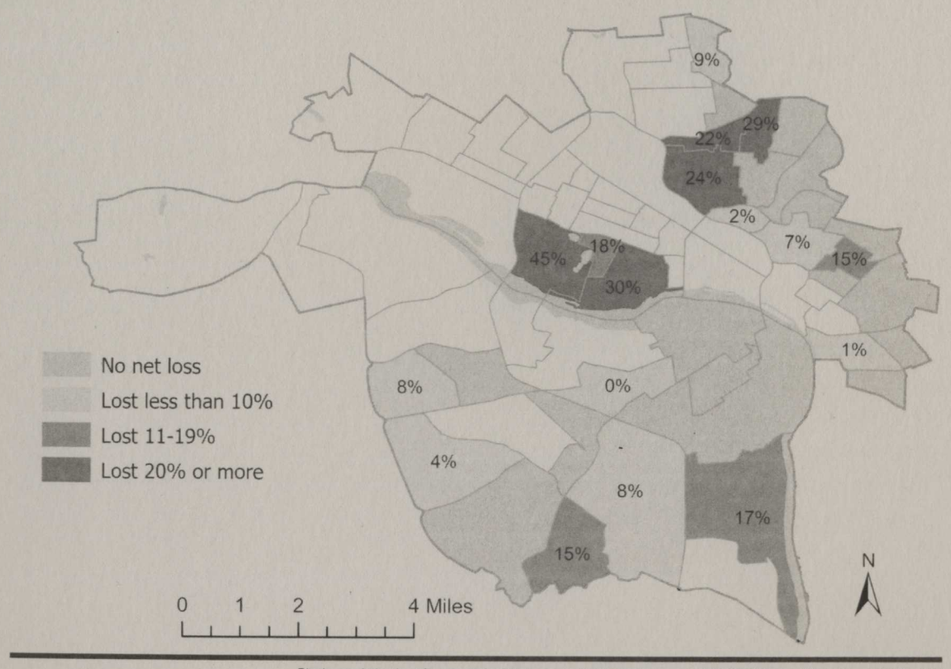
> Chavez Ravine grew into a village with a grocery store, a school, and so forth. In its last years it had about two thousand families. It was a happy community where everyone knew and helped one another. At night there were lighted bonfires, and people gathered around and sang songs. Many houses had some sort of domesticated animals such as sheep, cows, goats, pigs, chickens and peacocks. In many ways, Chavez Ravine was living a life all its own. Horse drawn plows were still in use, and the hillsides were planted with corn and sugar cane. There were religious processions in the village, one during Lent, another on December 12th commemorating the Madonna of Guadalupe.... Though all this reminded one of a village in Mexico, nonetheless this was old Los Angeles with a charm all its own, a Los Angeles we will never see again.

Photographs best describe Chavez Ravine just as demolition was threatened, since English news reports at the time fluttered between paternalistic racism and romanticization of rural poverty. On August 20, 1951, the Los Angeles Times ran photos and a long article about “the passing of Chavez Ravine.” Long opposed to any kind of public housing, the Times sympathized with the families who were being removed from what i t portrayed as a quaint Mexican village, quoting residents in privatized, patriotic rhetoric that served the Times’s agenda: “We built our homes here, not the government. We don’t want t o live somewhere else. Taking away our homes takes our incentive to be good American citizens” (Los Angeles Times, 1951a, p. 2).



Map of Chavez Ravine's hillside district - Ken Gutierrez

Somewhere between 970 and 1,800 house-holds with about 3,300 inhabitants were to be removed, depending on the estimate. According to a housing authority document dated June 13, 1951, the Elysian Park Heights site comprised 254.4 acres with 972 dwelling units. In a survey of dwelling conditions, it reported that 87 percent had one or more basic deficiencies, 64 percent had two or more, and 14 percent of the dwellings were "standard homes."" A basic deficiency, in this case, involved major structural deterioration or lack of sanitary facilities.



Black population loss from majority-Black census tracts in Richmond, VA (2010-2019) - Photo from HOME of VA

News reports indicated that a full third o f the families refused to sell, forcing the city housing authority into extensive condemnation proceedings. Wilkinson tried to lessen the opposition of the Times by taking Chandler's son to the Chavez Ravine site. Wilkinson believed anyone could see that it was an ideal site: there was no land that large within 40 miles of town. The effort must have been wasted, since the Times continued its steady campaign against Elysian Park Heights in particular and public housing in general. Perhaps Chandler saw the point all too clearly but preferred another land use.

Housing advocates had prepared well for the expected 10,000 units; LA was the first city in the nation to apply for and be granted federal funds from the 1949 Housing Act. But big dreams needed a lot of elbow room. Scale was the defining factor at Chavez Ravine, and there, as at Aliso Village, it unleashed large-scale destruction. With 10,000 units to come, the housing authority needed to find some big sites in order to avoid splitting its building efforts into dozens of smaller sites. The 254 acres of Chavez Ravine, renamed Elysian Park Heights, would absorb 3,360 units, a full third of the total.? This and one other large site (an extension at Rose Hills to a hundred units of existing public housing) were t o account for half of the total between them.® In the end, these extra- large projects would not only be canceled but would bring down public housing across LA.

It was indeed a beautiful site, with rolling hills and distant vistas, nestled into a wild city park. All this made it easy to imagine the utopia to come. Indeed, it had been taken as a "site" of civic interest for many years, when planners considered locating a world's fair there in 1938 and again a few years later. Like Aliso Village, Chavez Ravine's ultimate development was preceded by earlier attempts which, while they failed to build their proposed projects, effectively paved the way for later undertakings in more ways than one. (As we shall see, this pattern also describes Playa Vista's development.) It may have been the world's fair campaigns that drew Burns's attention to the Ravine, where he and a partner named Weingard' (the developer of Lakeside) bought a large piece of land. These for-profit developers would, in the final analysis, be instrumental in the Ravine's outcome. In addition, the Navy-Marine Corps Armory was built there as another indication that Chavez Ravine had a public purpose in the city.

But what about all those families living mainly at the top of the Ravine? The scale of the homes was small, in some cases extra-small. Strewn along dirt roads, stepping down the hillsides, ad hoc houses leaned into the fences of more substantial bungalows, next to churches, stores, and school. That description of the houses stemmed from one well-publicized photo (see fig. 155) taken of an atypical part of the Ravine. Unlike most of the homes, which followed western suburban patterns of a single house facing the street on a single lot, in this zone dozens of small dwellings are scattered across the hillside, just below the reservoir. Some sit directly in the roadway easement, others are strung precariously along steep footpaths. 'This image provided evidence that Chavez Ravine was like no other part of the city, As propaganda, it argued for slum clearance. Yet, as such photographs attest, the rural quality of this community held a certain attraction to the outsider and resident alike.

Church Hill Block - The Valentine Museum

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Chavez Ravine was named after Julian Chavez, who arrived in LA from New Mexico in the 1830s and soon thereafter succeeded in gaining title to the land. Chavez Ravine's settlement origins are spotty, but in the Times a well known, liberal attorney named Marshall Stimson is credited as the first speculator and houser.

Housing demolition in Elysian Park Heights - Photograph by Leonard Nadel

It was he -

> who moved about 200 Mexican families, then living in the Los Angeles River bottom, into the area about 1913. Today he says "I sold them homesites. They had t o buy to have pride of ownership, but the price was cheap. They had good air and they raised their children. "I resent this talk of slum clearance. These humble homes are not the finest but the same health standards do not apply where there is plenty of free air as compared with crowded tenements downtown." (Los Angeles Times, August 20, 1951, p. 2)

Perhaps even more than in The Flats, the people of Chavez Ravine appear to have constituted a stable community. There was the strong presence of the Catholic church, a number of neighborhood commercial enterprises, and a fine community school, Palo Verde Elementary. The residents had organized successfully in years past to demand city services like sewage and street paving, and against the threat to health of a local brickworks. These previous debates helped residents organize against the public housing development proposed. They were joined in the battle against the 10,000-unit program by a number of odd bedfellows. Some o f the most vocal were the middle-class homeowners' organization near the Rose Hills site, CASH (Citizens Against Socialist Housing), the Chamber of Commerce, and the Home Builders Association, not to mention the Times (see Hines, 1982a; Freedman, 1959).

Of the eleven sites under consideration, Chavez Ravine was receiving far the most attention from the housing authority in terms of architecture and funding. As of May 1 , 1952, over $3 million had been paid to owners of site property at Elysian Park Heights, while at Rose Hills, where a development of similar magnitude was proposed, only about $600,000 had been spent by the same date. Clearly, it was Chavez Ravine that had to be stopped, from the point of view of public housing opponents."

Clearing predominantly black neighborhoods in Shockoe Bottom and Valley for the construction of Interstate 95 - VCU Libraries

Clearing predominantly native neighborhoods in Chavez Ravine for the Dodger Stadium - Los Angeles Herald Examiner Photo

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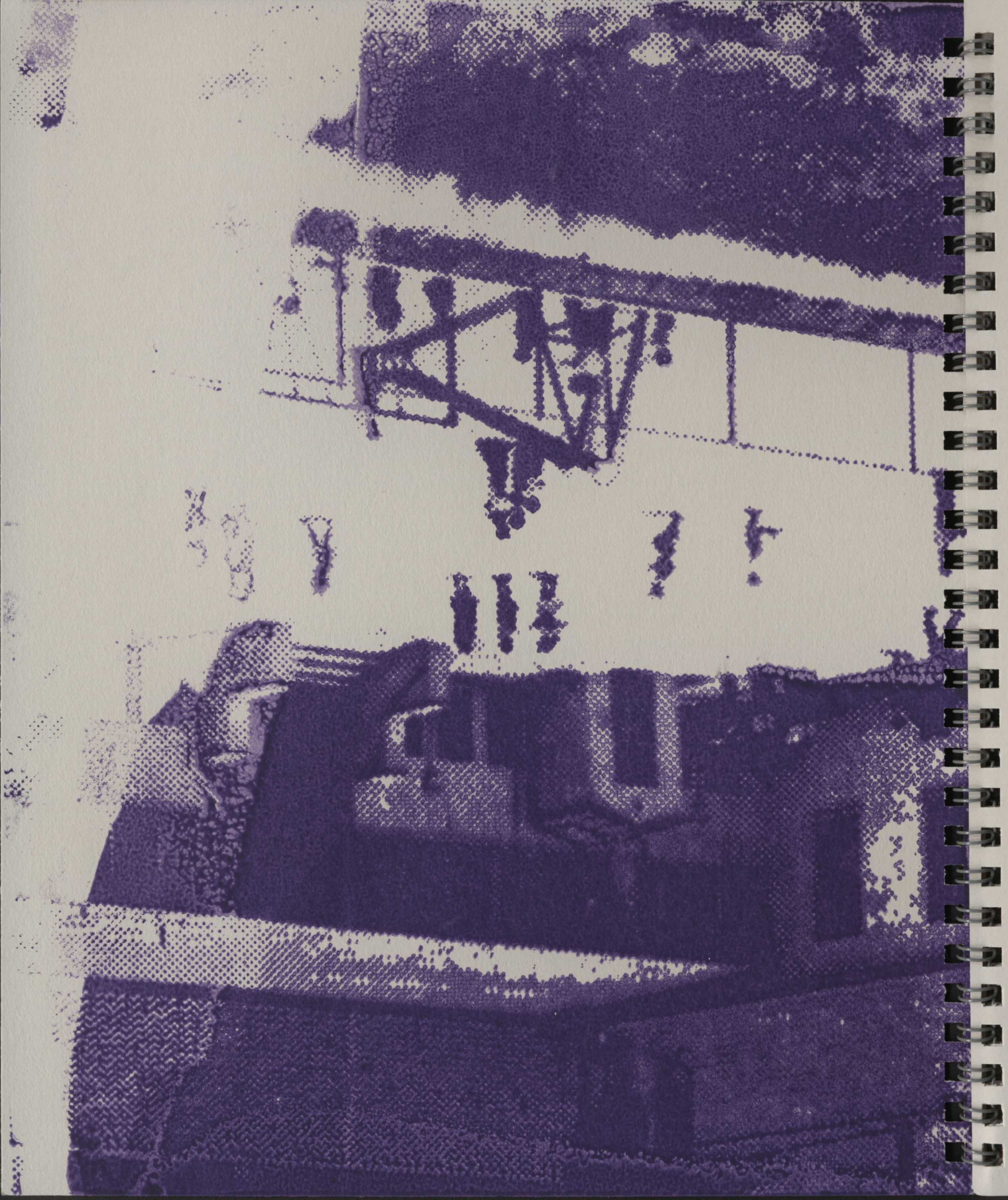
This republishing of Dana Cuff's The Provisional City features images of or in relation to Richmond, Virginia's own past with gentrification, redistricing, and displacement of natives respective to areas like Church Hill and Chavez Ravine. This provides a chance for the history of Chavez Ravine to circulate in the context of the East Coast while comparing the land and context in which this text is being republished.